

After School Programs: Play, Pay or Pray? Part II The Players

BY [Robert Haynes-Peterson](#), Thursday Sep. 03, 2009



“Academic psychologists are quite clear on the importance of play for learning,” says Dr. Lisa Damour, clinical psychiatrist for the [Laurel School](#), a highly lauded girl’s school in Shaker Heights, OH. When parents are choosing an after-school program for their kids, what works best: Additional academic tutoring, Music-influenced learning, non-structured play or some combination of all of the above? In [Part I of this review](#), HalogenLife took a look at some of the pros and cons of more traditional academic opportunities, focused enrichment classes and private tutoring. Here, we explore the benefits of play inside a supervised program.

The [Laurel School](#) is frequently cited as one of the best all-girl schools in the country, and is home to the Center for Research on Girls. Yet Dr. Damour is adamant about the value of play. “We’ve long known that children learn best through exploration, and that imaginary play and make-believe lay in the foundation for all sorts of critical academic skills. Research has shown that children who go to pre-schools with an academic emphasis on early academics are no further ahead than their peers who went to play-oriented pre-schools by the end of first grade. However, children from academically-oriented pre-schools report higher levels of anxiety.”

New York-based school psychologist J. David Carr agrees. “To an adult, it might not seem they’re learning their ABCs while playing, but in fact, they’re digesting what they’ve learned throughout the day.”

That’s not to suggest educators and experts are expecting you to pay for the privilege of having your children let loose on an open ball court for three hours, where they may just spend their time texting and playing on their NintendoDS. Although some come close.

“The original kindergarten was just directed play,” says Richard Mussler-Wright of [PCS Edventures](#), a company that provides learning modules in science and technology for schools and after-school programs. “There are parents who buy into that model which, philosophically comes from MIT mathematician Seymour Papert: That engaged children in the right environment will push themselves to learn. On the other hand, without guidance and some structure, a program can rapidly denigrate into chaos and disuse.”

Programs like [PCS Edventures](#) and various school robotics programs manage to bridge the worlds of play and learning. PCS employs robotics, BrickLab construction bricks, K’Nex and fischertechnik building sets to encourage girls and boys to explore physics, engineering and technology.

“Play time *is* learning time,” insists Dr. Allan Cameron, senior mentor of the Carl Hayden [High School Robotics team](#) in Phoenix. “With play, kids learn to resolve conflicts without adult intervention, and are directing their own learning, rather than fitting into the day’s curriculum. After-school activities can combine the best of both environments.”



[Sunbrook Academy](#), which operates seven facilities in the Atlanta, Georgia area that offer after-school programs for kindergarten through 12-year-olds, likewise encourages loosely structured activity groups focused on skills like jewelry making, writing and art.

“After a long day of structure at school, they really do need a little less structure,” says Jacki Gass, president of Sunbrook. “Perhaps, structure with flexibility is a better way to say it.” Each facility helps 25 to 30 kids with homework, then guides them to a course unit appropriate to the child’s interests. “And the groups are different from school to school based on the students’ interests.”

Most educators these days have struck a balance in after-school programs between extreme rote teaching of a specific skill and the sort of Free-Play, Kid-Dictated set-ups of the alternative schools of the 1960s and ‘70s. “We have a centrist system today, where traditional schools are mildly right of center and progressive schools are mildly left of center,” says Ronald Stewart, headmaster of Manhattan’s prestigious [York Preparatory Academy](#). “The magic bullet, if you will, is good teaching, something we don’t support well enough in America.”

Apart from relaxing and re-orienting the brain, educators feel that after-school programs offer advantages over simply sitting at home with a nanny for many children. “You can study all day long,” says Gass. “But After-school programs also provide social and emotional interaction, allowing children the opportunity to improve in other areas as well. One of the things that has been proven over and over is that social and emotional development is a very high indicator of academic success. If children are not doing well socially, they’re not likely to get very far.”

In addition, for many parents, after-school programs provide a safety net, particularly with older children who might otherwise be unsupervised. Here, safety doesn’t simply mean avoiding risk of fire or abduction, but a tendency for kids on their own to get in trouble, either rotting their brains via video games, or exploring risky activities like drugs and sex. One 2007 study also found that [workplace productivity decreases](#) when parents are fretting over where their kids are after school and who is picking them up. After school programs are one way of alleviating those concerns.

Is the playground, background or ball court completely lost in all of this scheduling and loose structuring? Definitely not, says Laurel School’s Dr. Damour. “Parents should absolutely make time for unstructured play for their children, and not let this crucial form of early education become a relic of the past.”

[Part I: The Payers](#)

[Part II: The Players](#)

Part III: The Prayers

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